

Southwest and JetBlue: Flying the Low Fare Skies

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

For me as a Brit, I've always found that many things are cheaper in the States. Certainly heading to the gas station in America to fill up the car is a treat for us, as it's about half the price that it is at home. One thing that had always amazed me though was how much airlines charged for domestic flights.

think it's worth explaining what I'm used to in Europe. We have various budget airlines and perhaps the cheapest deal we ever got was a return flight to Venice for just one penny, yes that's right, one cent plus airport taxes, which the airlines can't do much about. That gives you an idea of the expectations I have when it comes to airfares. Even today, I know that I can usually get airfares for approximately £30 per person each way, in today's exchange rate, that's something like \$50. So when I was being quoted hundreds of dollars to fly between different destinations in the States, I was horrified to say the least. Surely there must be some budget airlines in America as well?

Of course there are and soon enough, I came across them, thanks to recommendations from the wonderful community that is the [PassPorter message boards](#). The first airline we experienced was Southwest, an airline I'd actually learned about a few months before we flew with them in my management diploma course. The reason we were hearing about them was that we were discussing how businesses learn from one another and we were told that Southwest had been looking at how to speed up the turn-around of their aircraft from when they landed to when they departed. How did they do that? We were told that executives had gone to visit the Formula One racing teams, who race around the world, to see how they achieve pit stops in a matter of seconds, taking tires off and replacing them and refueling the cars.

I treated that with a bit of skepticism, until I saw Southwest in operation for the first time. We were at John Wayne airport in Los Angeles, heading away from Disneyland and up to San Francisco and it was about 20 minutes before our departure time and there was no sign of our aircraft. I remember confidently declaring to my husband that we'd never leave on time, as I know that would be the case at home. What happened next couldn't have surprised me more. We were all told to line up, according to our boarding numbers and, as soon as the plane touched down, the outgoing passengers were herded off the plane and we entered in an orderly fashion, all in order. Before we knew it, we

were taking off and it was on time as well. Very impressive.

Since then, we've flown again with Southwest and had similar experiences. Today, instead of just having the different boarding groups, you have individually assigned boarding numbers. On our most recent flight, we were A33 and A34 and everyone was lined up according to their number. We'd ended up with those at something like 23 hours and 58 minutes before our flight, which shows how quickly the A boarding group gets booked up.

Realizing that, Southwest recently introduced its Early Bird Check-in. Your boarding position is automatically assigned within 36 hours of your departure, meaning no more racing to ensure you're online 24 hours beforehand to try and land that all-important A boarding group. While there's no guarantee of a position in the A group with the Early Bird Check-in, obviously it gives you a much better chance. Of course, there's a charge for this service, but one thing Southwest has shied away from is charging a second bag fee (or even a first bag free -- your first two bags fly free!), which most rivals have now introduced.

The company's been running since 1971 and is a massive business today, with more 3,000 flights every day serving more than 60 cities in 34 states. We're obviously not alone in the great experiences that we've had with them to date, as they regularly have one of the lowest level of complaints from passengers in the industry and have a trophy cupboard of awards that anyone would be proud of.

Another company with a similar raft of airline industry awards is JetBlue. They're relatively new kids on the block, compared to Southwest. They've only been around since 1999, but now fly to more than 50 destinations, including international ones, such as the Bahamas, Costa Rica, Jamaica, and Mexico. Perhaps their big selling point was the announcement in 2006 that they would remove one more row of seats from each of the A320 aircraft, reducing the number of seats to 150. This gives an average seat pitch of 34", very generous, considering that on international long haul flights with both British Airways and Virgin Atlantic, the seat pitch is 32", so you get more legroom with JetBlue than you may do on flights of nine or ten hours plus!

If you're happy to pay more, which we have done in the past, you can experience JetBlue's Even More Legroom, which gives you 38" of legroom, equivalent to the "Premium Economy" class on some international airlines. Having sampled this, I can say that I'd happily pay the excess to enjoy this luxury again!

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Another innovation from JetBlue is their LiveTV system, which gives them 36 channels of satellite TV programming at each seat. This was something that absolutely fascinated me when we flew with them, although I had to watch it from my husband's seat, as mine resolutely refused to work for me and I was not going to give up my Even More Legroom seat to enjoy it! It's something I'd personally love to see a lot more airlines introducing in the future.

Unfortunately, one of our flights with JetBlue was just a week too early to sample their new Terminal 5 at JFK in New York, which boasts 26 gates, 20 security lanes and facilities such as free Wi-Fi, a children's area and more than 20 restaurants and a similar number of shops. Maybe one day in the future, we'll get to sample it.

Although there's no charge on board for snacks, JetBlue is one of the many airlines to have bought in the second checked bag fee, with passengers wanting to fly with more than one checked bag charged \$30.

It's clear each airline has its plus and minus points and it does depend, to a certain extent, on what matters most to you -- whether taking two bags without paying an additional fee is important or perhaps extra legroom is a must for you. Having flown with both Southwest and JetBlue, we wouldn't hesitate to fly again with either of them. The old adage says you get what you pay for, but with both these airlines, you don't pay much, but the service you get is great with both.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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